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ABSTRACT

A definition of illiteracy is the inability to read and compute at the standard needed by an adult within a chosen social context. While statistics may vary depending upon the study, women make up the majority of the illiterates nationally and internationally. Three factors that contribute to illiteracy among women are social acculturation and sex-role stereotyping, personal problems that promote high school incompletion, and institutional barriers to women in adult basic education (ABE) programs. Programs geared to the needs of women entering ABE classes are beginning to surface. Nationally, other events and programs show promise in calling attention to the problems of illiteracy and the needs of illiterate women and men. The President's Adult Literacy Initiative has coordinated and targeted existing funds to be used for a variety of initiatives. Some speak to needs of women, particularly the Headstart parents' project and 80 demonstration projects for dropouts and teens. Much of the real difference may be made by volunteers; the national initiatives assume that volunteers will carry the load. The Cuban model shows volunteerism is viable when government supports its efforts. The self-help collective--a model of empowerment--is another approach that has been adopted. (YLB)

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ILLITERATE WOMEN: NEW APPROACHES FOR NEW LIVES

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PRESENTATION

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INTRODUCTION

My presentation will provide background information on illiteracy in general and specific information on the factors that promote and sustain illiteracy among women. Initially, I intended to include feminist models of empowerment that may be applied to the problem of illiteracy. Feminist theorists such as Arendt, Emmet, and Hartsock refer to empowerment as the process of taking power within the context of community (Arendt, 1972; Emmet, 1954; Hartsock, 1983). They use descriptors such as energy, potential, competence and ability which are both contributed to a community and a product of acting within the community. The only actualized feminist model of empowerment is the "collective," which is a group of people who make decisions and determine actions through consensual decision-making. Their rules of behavior are also arrived at consensually. Within this context, the members contribute their energy and competence and by acting collectively further develop their own potential and abilities.

Although my review of current literature revealed only one example of a self-help collective for some New Jersey adults working to become literate, (Gathman, 1986), there are examples of programs which are not collective but do promote empowerment, particularly for women. These examples will be highlighted in my talk.

What is Illiteracy

> "Illiteracy is the concreate expression of an unjust social reality, it is politically unjust." Paolo Freire, 1985.

The definition of illiteracy is largely political. The Adult Performance Level Project in the early 70's based its functional competency definition upon three criteria: level of education; level of income; status of occupation.

Kazamek criticizes these criteria as those eminating from a bureaucracy without regard to cultural differences (Kazamek, 1985), and Hart implies that some cultures may not value literacy (Hart, 1986). Also, criteria are subject to change (Godby, 1986). Earlier census data defined as functionally illiterate anyone scoring below a fifth grade level (AAACE, June-July, 1986). Now the Federal government awards literacy dollars to programs serving people who score below a ninth grade level.

Sometimes the findings generated from studies on who is illiterate create controversy. The 1982 census literacy study indicates that between 17 and 21 million persons in the U.S. are illiterate (AAACE, August, 1986). However, Robert Barnes from the Department of Education admitted that the test was never designed to measure adult illiteracy (AAACE, August, 1986). In fact, too many methodological flaws marred the study's findings which led Jonathan Kozol to remark that the federal government used the study to downplay the numbers so that budget cuts could be justified (AAACE, May, 1986).

While the accepted definition appears to be whatever federal funding is based upon at a particular point in time, others take a more practical if not as political a view. Boromuth states "one is literate when one can perform well enough to obtain maximum value from materials one needs to read" (Kazamek, 1985). In agreement is David Harman who states as his definition, "possession of skills needed to function in society" (Harmon, 1985). For our purposes, inability to read and compute below the standard needed by an adult within a chosen social context will hold as our definition.

Who is Illiterate

We have all heard the sobering statistics on illiteracy in this country:

16% of the entire white population

44% of the entire black population

56% of the entire Hispanic population

15% of the recent graduates from urban high schools read at less than the 6th grade level

one million teenagers between 12 and 17 can't read above a 3rd grade level

85% of the juveniles who come before the courts

60% of the prison population

and 2.3 million join the ranks yearly (Kozol, 1985).

While the statistics may vary depending upon the study, one finding holds constant: women make up the majority of the illiterates nationally and internationally. The international picture on women is both promising and disheartening. In 1950, there were 95 million girls in school. In 1985 the number of girls in school climbed to an estimated 390 million. Also, United Nations data show that 161 out of 194 countries with autonomous school systems had compulsory education since 1980 with 58% requiring 8 to 10 years of schooling, 34% requiring 7 or fewer years, and 7% requiring 10 or more years of schooling (Sivard, 1985). Incidentally, the U.S. ranks 49th in literacy among 158 members of the United Nations (Kozol, 1985).

While these statistics show improvements in the education of women, companion statistics are less optimistic. In developing countries, 60% of the girls ages 5 through 19 are not in school. One hundred thirty million more women than men are illiterate. In primary and secondary schools boys account for 55% and girls, 45% of the population. Higher levels of education show a disparity with women occupying 43% of the spaces while men occupy 57%. In South Asia 38 million more places in schools are needed to bring the girls' enrollment equal to that of the boys. Also in South Asia and Africa, 4 out of 5 women over 25 years of age never had any schooling. Dropout rates and absenteeism are more common for girls. And in rural areas of 3rd world countries, girls' work at home is considered more important than their schooling (The World of Women, 1985; Sevard, 1985).

To make matters worse, laws requiring compulsory education are not enforced. Thus, the gains experienced by some women serve only to highlight the lack of education experienced by many more.

Nationally the picture of women and literacy is a little less bleak although hardly glorious. Twenty-three percent of the adult women are illiterate compared with 17% of the adult men. Seventy five percent of the heads of households living below poverty level are women while only 34% are men (Kozol, 1985). Fifty percent to 75% of these women cannot read at the 8th grade level making illiteracy a contributing factor in the feminization of poverty which is characterized by higher unemployment, lower educational attainment, more dependent children, and lower earnings for women (Connections, November, 1985).

A functionally illiterate woman living below the poverty level experiences a problematic existence. She may not be able to read labels on medicine bottles or comprehend her fuel bills. Her illiteracy often prevents her from moving into training programs or other occupations. She cannot respond to notes sent home from school concerning her children. She cannot help them with their homework nor read to them. Her chances are very good of producing another generation of non-readers.

The generational effect of illiteracy is demonstrated by a longitudinal study reported in 1976 in the Cleveland Public schools. In kindergarten 75% of the children were at or above national norms in ability. By the third grade both white and children of color began scoring below national norms. By fifth grade the difference was now at 10.8%. By ninth grade 38% of the white youngsters and 60.5% of the children of color were below national norms. By 11th grade 28% of the white children and 59.4% of the children of color fell below national norms. A total of 67% of these students dropped out of high school (Kozol, 1985). The children in this study began school with promise but the illiteracy of their own parents contributed to adverse changes in the

direction of their lives. They are likely to effect the lives of their own children in much the same way.

What Contributes to Illiteracy Among Women?

There are many factors that contribute. Three in particular are: social acculturation and sex role stereotyping; personal problems which promote high school incompletion; institutional barriers to women in ABE programs.

Social Acculturation and Sex-Role Stereotyping

Socially there are subtle and not so subtle constraints for women. We still live with stereotypic thinking about women's roles--specifically, as wife and mother. Some women limit their own thinking by seeing those roles as the only ones acceptable. Our children's text books portray women in secondary roles. The European Parliament prepared a study that indicated little change in sex-role stereotyping in school books. The U.N. Economic Commission study of primary children's books found numerous examples of presentations of dominant men and passive women. In the U.S., 75% of the illustrations in text books show the activities of boys and men only (Sivard, 1985; World of Women, 1985). It seems as if feminist gains of the '70's have fared poorly in the '80's. We still battle the sexism inherent in our acculturation.

Personal Problems That Promote High School Incompletion

Some personal problems are shared by both girls and boys who drop out of high school. A study in Maryland reported that the 25% to 60% who drop out yearly can be identified early, often between 3rd and 6th grades (Synopsis, 1985). They are the students who have fallen between one and five years behind. As a group they tend to learn more slowly, have a low self-esteem, are easily discouraged, feel alienated, lack a goal orientation to school, and come from families with low educational achievement levels (Synopsis, 1985). Their reasons for dropping out include boredom and a dislike for school.

In addition, many of these students express a sense of powerlessness. They see teachers and administrators, or "the system," as having the real control over their lives (More, 1985).

While the above affects both boys and girls there are other personal problems that lead to dropping out and are more likely to effect girls. These include marriage, pregnancy, family violence and abuse. They also speak to conditions of powerlessness.

Many young women who are dissatisfied with their parents may act out--leave home for marriage as an escape. They marry, not only to escape, but because they may be pregnant. Some choose not to marry but to bear a child. Whatever the pattern, these women lack basic skills and are dependent upon forces external to themselves inclusive of welfare and financial assistance from parents or partner. Some work but their earnings are not adequate to support themselves. Once a child is born, the mother must accept aid for that child. Some of the mothers are still children themselves and they remain subject to forces that are external.

There are other factors that impact a woman's ability to exercise internal control. Some have been the subject of physical or sexual abuse by fathers, brothers, or uncles (Safman, 1982). Abuse over time damages self-esteem and the will to succeed. The over-riding emotional and physical strains associated with abuse make these young women incapable of caring about school completion. Women who were physically and sexually abused by partners and whom I interviewed in Illinois and Utah shelters also reported being abused by their fathers. Most of these women could not read a simple questionnaire and were in need of remedial education (Safman, 1982). Thus, for many of these women their perceptions of being powerless and at the mercy of some external control were brutally accurate.

Another condition promoting powerlessness is substance abuse. More girls are experimenting with drugs and alcohol during their high school years. The percentage of female users between 7th and 12th grade has climbed above 70% (Kumpfer, 1986). Some of these girls who become substance abusers lose interest in school and drop out only to find themselves locked into the external control of their dependence upon drugs or alcohol. Thus, problems of early pregnancy, domestic violence and substance abuse erode a young woman's sense of personal power and interfere with her ability to perform in school.

What About the Institutional Barriers to Women in ABE Programs?

Women who drop out may find returning to an ABE or adult high school completion program very difficult. Lifestyle differences cannot always be accommodated by existing programs (Martin, 1986). Employment demands, child care, distance and transportation problems often act as barriers (ACET, Aug. 1986; Fahy, 1986). Additional barriers may be intrinsic to programs (Keaton, 1986). Texts that do not speak to the lifestyles of returning women nor the opportunity to use one's life experience in the classroom may contribute to disinterest and poor adherence. Other institutional barriers include staffs that are part-time and unable to provide adequate follow-up on their students. Staff members often hold two or more jobs and have family responsibiliies (Penn ABE, 1986). Without continuity of service to women entering ABE programs, the institution cannot provide the atmosphere many women and men require for successful completion.

Whether they are in their teens or their adult years, women who drop out of high school and cannot be accommodated by the adult education system are forced to endure the stigma and attendant problems associated with functional illiteracy.

What is Being Done to Address Illiteracy Among Women

The first question to ask is what is being done to prevent young women and men from dropping out of high school. The Secretary of Education, William Bennett, is reported by USA Today, April 29, 1986 to have stated that "the drop-out rate has risen when more dollars are pumped into schools." Instead, reports Bennett, potential dropouts should be able to choose their school and the school that takes another school's dropout should be rewarded if it can keep and graduate that student (USA Today, April, 1986). While that is an interesting idea and may, in fact, help some potential dropout, it hardly begins to touch some of the problems that lead girls to high school incompletion. Ignoring Dr. Bennett's comments on the uselessness of pumping money into the school system, the National Education Association reports that it is releasing $700,000 in its anti-drop-out campaign. It will take time to assess its success (USA Today, April 1986).

Getting closer to the problem are Diamond and Taylor who in the New Jersey Journal of Lifelong Learning, Feb. 85 suggest the need for more alternative programs right within the school along with additional tutors and counselors. They appropriately call attention to the truant whom they say needs special care instead of apathy. And they suggest that a neighborhood learning center may augment the efforts of the school and help to dissuade students from dropping out (Diamond and Taylor, 1985).

The above suggestions have merit and may keep some young people in school. But, they do not deal specifically with the problems of girls. However, there is one, or at least one model of direct intervention to prevent girls from dropping out. Recently, "60 Minutes" reported on a high school in Mississippi, where girls (and boys) who are sexually active are taught about birth control and sexually transmitted diseases. Girls who are pregnant take nutrition and child care classes along with their other subjects. Day care is provided for

their children. This progressive program was developed to keep girls in school. The supportive environment which accepts them and their situations is helping to prevent generational cycles of illiteracy and promote empowerment.

However, this high school is a rare example of a dynamic, yet practical approach to the overwhelming personal problems of high-school girls: teenage pregnancy and parenthood.

This author suggests other interventions in the lives of girls who have been or are sexually abused in their homes. How people communicate within their families affects the future relationships of the children within that family. Male children who are battered are likely to batter their children (Safman, 1982). Female children whose mothers scream at them are likely to do the same with their children. Intervention into this cycle may take place in the schools in health classes or in special sessions. The subject of "effective communication skills" is an appropriate one for school children to discuss. Learning acceptable ways of saying "I am angry, or frightened, or I am wrong" helps young people to communicate effectively with their peers and family members. Discussions on expressing feelings and managing anger can begin to alert children not only on how to express feelings but how not to behave. The topics of sexual abuse and family violence must be boldly approached along with practical information on what a child can do to stop the abuse against herself or himself. Discussion leaders who are trained in family violence intervention can be helpful in creating an understanding of the problem, preventing self-blame by the victim, and presenting resource information. Discussions should also include information on family planning and sexually transmitted diseases. Problems of substance abuse may be handled in the same way Junior high years are not too early to begin raising awareness of drug and alcohol use particularly when girls and boys report using these substances as

early as seventh grade (Kumpfer, 1986). Until more emphasis is placed on the realities of why some young people drop out, young women can be expected to remain victims of family violence and substance abuse which eventually lead to their lack of personal power and control over their lives. Thus, intervention in the school setting is an investment in empowering those who may otherwise remain victims.

Programs geared to the needs of women entering ABE classes are beginning to surface. In a poor section of Brooklyn, New York, one program, called the "Open Book," contains two classes, a 0-4th grade and a 5th-8th grade class. The classes are attended mostly by minority women between 20 and 65 years of age, many of whom are welfare mothers. They are learning literacy skills by talking about their life situations and the factors contributing to those situations. They study Black and Puerto Rican history and focus on what is happening in their neighborhoods (Open Book, 1986). This model empowers its participants because it accommodates specifically the lifestyles of the women by validating their realities, and using their contributions and their histories to improve literacy skills.

There probably are other local programs similar in nature and geared specifically to the needs of the women who participate in them.

Nationally, there are other events and programs that show promise in calling attention to the problems of illiteracy and the needs of illiterate women and men. A national initiative called "PLUS"--Project Literacy USA--is a cosponsored effort between the American Broadcasting Company and the Public Broadcasting Service (AAACE, August 1986). Having begun this fall, PBS uses its newstime and some primetime to provide coverage on problems of illiteracy. ABC is using literacy as a theme in children's daytime and prime time dramatic programs. "PLUS" is encouraging local station participation in developing literacy programs of regional interest.

Presenting the public with a different option, American Cable Systems in Beverly, Mass. has asked viewers to turn off their TV sets one hour a day and read (ACET, March 1986). And they are using a percentage of their new subscriptions to buy books for the 27 communities they serve.

The President's Adult Literacy Initiative while not calling for a funding increase did coordinate and target existing funds to be used for the following:

--recruitment of federal employees as literacy volunteers

--dispersement of college work study funds to 50 post-secondary institutions for use by students working in adult literacy projects

--provision of literacy training for parents in 15 Headstart project sites

--allotment of funds to 20 pilot literacy programs for older adults

--linkages among the Departments of Labor and Health and Human Services with private organizations on 80 demonstration projects for high school dropouts, teen parents and the developmentally disabled (ACET, August, 1986).

Some of these initiatives are bound to speak to the needs of women particularly the Headstart parent's project and the 80 demonstration projects for dropouts and teen parents.

Much of the real difference may be made by volunteers. The August 86 Issue of Adult and Continuing Education Today reports that 107,000 volunteers are involved in adult education efforts. Eighty-two thousand are involved with the Laubach project and the Literacy Volunteers of America. Others are involved in individual programs and in tutoring (ACET, August 1986; Laubach, 1986). A volunteer training program directed by the University of New Mexico, in Albuquerque, demonstrated the effectiveness of volunteers if they are properly trained and given adequate support services (Bowles, 1986).

With the exception of "Project PLUS," the national initiatives assume that volunteers will carry the load. The Cuban model shows that volunteerism is viable but only when the government supports its efforts by more than a few projects and lots of platitudes. The Cuban model worked because Castro, as head of

state, ordered that volunteers be gathered, thoroughly trained, and completely supported through a national network of services (Freire, 1981).

While Cuba's literacy initiative was a top down approach, a grass roots approach may be possible. However, it requires that all groups involved with literacy collaborate and gather support for one single issue: more federal support for literacy programs. The larger group would need to gain support among influencial business people, legislators, and community leaders. A public outcry against illiteracy must be loud and clear--a unified sound in Washington's collective ear. Without a massive public effort, our gains will be hit and miss and the needs of many illiterate women and men will go unmet.

However, the current lack of federal support has not stopped those who care. Some have adopted an older model and applied it to the needs of illiterate adults (Gathman, 1986). The model is the self-help collective which made its debut in the 60's and 70's. Basically, the self-help group has no leaders but provides role models and support as people share their hopes and experience with those who have "been there." The self-help model has enjoyed wide success as the organizational basis of Alcoholics Anonymous, Weight Watchers and Narcotics Anonymous. The self-help model is one of empowerment.

This model has been used for 15 years in feminist shelters for abused women. Here, in small support groups, women learn to accept their feelings about the abuse and develop new communication and survival skills in order to remove violence from their lives. Shelters typically work towards helping women become self-sufficient and empowered. When a woman is found in need of literacy training, most shelters will link her with a local literacy program. Inclusion of literacy training as an integral part of a woman's stay in a shelter promotes her move towards freedom of abuse and self-sufficiency.

Addressing illiteracy in general and among women in particular is a complex task. To address literacy is also to address the feminization of poverty. It is to address the sexual abuse and substance abuse issues. It is to acknowledge teen pregnancies and the specific reasons young women leave high school and either fail to enter or fail to continue in our adult programs. But only by addressing these issues can we begin to empower and enable women to contribute to the quality of their own lives, the lives of their children and to their communities.

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